

NNewsline



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America's Communities*

Winning Participation Strategies for Neighborhood Networks Week

Neighborhood Networks Week 2004 celebrated the achievements of Neighborhood Networks centers located throughout the United States, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. From June 20–26, Neighborhood Networks centers showcased their roles in “Connecting Families With the Future” by participating in a variety of national and local events.

Encouraging residents to help plan and participate in Neighborhood Networks Week activities was key to successful celebrations. To highlight some effective strategies to boost resident participation, *NNewsline* recently interviewed an experienced center director, Sandra Thomas, who has coordinated several successful Neighborhood Networks Week activities at Grier Park Community Center in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Planning Strategies

“To begin getting residents involved in planning Neighborhood Networks Week activities, I invite a small group of three into my office and say, ‘Here’s my idea: a family cookout, for instance. Why don’t you come up with some other ideas?’ Then we put together all our ideas and divide up the work,” explains Thomas. “For example, the residents usually like to plan the menu and make up a shopping list. Then I shop for the food and decorations. I give balloons and streamers to the children and let them decorate the center. Involving the residents from the beginning is really important,” stresses Thomas. “If you empower them to take charge of part of the event, residents will be more likely to participate in an activity.”

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Encouraging Attendance

Thomas offered several ideas to encourage residents to attend Neighborhood Networks Week events:

- ◆ **Start a new class or activity** during Neighborhood Networks week. Residents curious about the new program will come to the center to learn more about it, then they will be drawn into the other Neighborhood Networks Week activities. In 2003, for example, Thomas scheduled the first of four workshops in a new financial literacy series to coincide with Neighborhood Networks Week. The workshop was also featured on a live national Neighborhood Networks Week Web cast: HUD used the event to announce a national Neighborhood Networks partnership with Bank of America to promote financial literacy in low-income communities.
- ◆ In 2003 Thomas sent invitations to Grier Park residents and to families living in nearby apartment complexes to **stop by during the lunch hour and have some cake and punch**. This attracted residents and helped publicize the center to families who might participate in future center classes or activities.
- ◆ Meals and events with food always have the biggest turnout, during Neighborhood Networks Week and throughout the year. For the past two years in December, the Grier Park center hosted a family Kwanzaa dinner for a full house. In 2004 Thomas is considering **a family cookout** for Neighborhood Networks Week because these events have been so popular and well attended.
- ◆ **Sponsor a party honoring children's achievements in school** and tell parents to bring their cameras. "Each year we hold a ceremony honoring children who were on the honor roll, regardless of which honor roll or how many times they made it," says Thomas. Since Neighborhood Networks Week comes in June, an honor roll party would be the perfect way to attract adults and children.

Neighborhood Networks Week Planning Guide

The *2004 Neighborhood Networks Week Planning Guide* offered centers many strategies to boost resident participation:

Open House. This is a perfect way to showcase your center to the community and let residents, potential volunteers, and partners see what your center does. During an open house you could invite residents and community partners to your center to show off a



program in action, recognize the accomplishments of a resident or a recent graduating class from one of your programs by presenting an award, or provide refreshments so that residents and potential partners can talk and mingle.

Job Fair. Invite local businesses and business owners to visit your center and showcase available jobs. A job fair is the perfect venue for anyone seeking employment at your center as well as for local employers looking to fill positions in your community. Invite local employers and employment specialists to meet with residents about local job opportunities.

Family Fun Day. Hold a special event for families on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon that encourages parents to come with their children and socialize with other residents. Activities could include a cookout, various sporting events for the entire family, face painting, clowns, or other children's entertainment.

Education/Literacy Day. Host an information session describing the education/literacy resources available within your community. Invite a representative from a local high school to explain the process of receiving a general equivalency diploma, and/or invite a local community college or university to explain the college application process to residents. Suggest that the local literacy council visit your center to hold private consultations with adult residents who want to improve their reading skills.

Kids' Field Day. This event could include a variety of fun, competitive, and recreational activities, including a wheelbarrow race, a tug of war, relay races, and a water balloon toss. Invite parents and ask them to help judge and supervise activities.

Multicultural Day. Have residents give presentations about their cultures. Help kids learn about other cultures by researching them on the Internet. Top off the event with an ethnic food potluck.

Center Poster Contest. To complement the national Neighborhood Networks Week poster contest, hold a contest at your own center. Announce the winners during a special ceremony for parents and children during Neighborhood Networks Week. Give a certificate or award to each entry (for example, most colorful, most creative, best slogan).

Song Lyrics Contest. Centers can participate in the national contest to create a Neighborhood Networks theme song. Winner(s) will be invited to debut their song at the 10th Anniversary Neighborhood Networks National Training Conference in 2005. During Neighborhood Networks Week, centers can host their own theme song contests. Each center may submit one entry to the national contest.



For more information about Neighborhood Networks Week:

Visit the Neighborhood Networks Web site

(www.NeighborhoodNetworks.org)

Phone: (888) 312-2743 (toll-free)

(800) 483-2209 (TTY)

E-mail: neighborhoodnetworks@hud.gov ♦

Afterschool Program Raises Student Performance

In just 6 months, the afterschool program at the Rainbow Terrace Neighborhood Networks Center in Cleveland, Ohio, has achieved success as 46 percent of the children in kindergarten through fifth grade have improved one grade level in math, science, and/or reading.

The success of the center's program is rooted in the cooperation among its key partners: Vesta Corporation, Rainbow Terrace's apartment management company; Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C); and the Cleveland Municipal School District. Together they worked to set up and operate the academically oriented program in which, on an average day, 30 to 40 children and youth participate in afterschool activities.

The Ohio State HUD Office complements these local partners. According to Barbara Bickham, Ohio's Neighborhood Networks Coordinator, "Preston Pace, Multifamily Hub Director for Ohio, is focused on having Ohio Neighborhood Networks centers help improve children's academic performance." Bickham often meets with Ohio center directors to discuss how their programs can help children improve in school.

Owner/Management Support

When Vesta Corporation purchased and renovated Rainbow Terrace Apartments, the owner constructed a new 1,300-square-foot Neighborhood Networks center. "We decided to develop a state-of-the-art computer learning center," says Vesta Managing Director Arthur Greenblatt. "We wanted to put the kids and adults on a level playing field with their counterparts in the suburbs." Vesta not only built and equipped the learning center, it also supplies residents with personal computers if an adult in the family participates in a computer program at the learning center.



Key Ingredients for Success

The history of Rainbow Terrace's afterschool center provides a blueprint for developing successful Neighborhood Networks programs.

- ◆ **Owner/management supports program.** Vesta Corporation, a Connecticut-based realty management company, constructed the onsite Neighborhood Networks center and then sought out an experienced, local educational partner to set up and operate the afterschool program.
- ◆ **Experienced educational institution operates program.** Tri-C, an experienced operator of community-based programs, operates and staffs the program, including providing financial resources. Equally important, Tri-C has a history of running K–12 academic programs for the Cleveland public schools.
- ◆ **Center tracks impact of program.** Tri-C obtains standardized test scores and marking period grades to plan program activities and to document the positive impacts of the program on the children who participate.
- ◆ **Cooperation and communication with local schools continues.** In planning the afterschool program, Tri-C secured the support of the Cleveland Municipal School District. Additionally, Tri-C meets regularly with the neighborhood elementary school staff, and the afterschool program draws directly from classroom weekly curriculum.

Experienced Educational Institution Operates Program

In March 2002 representatives from Vesta asked Cleveland City Council President Frank Jackson, who also represents the district in which Rainbow Terrace is located, for names of local groups that could start and operate a quality afterschool program. He recommended that they contact Tri-C because of its successful track record of operating afterschool programs for the Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

Vesta approached Tri-C about starting and directing an onsite afterschool program at Rainbow Terrace Apartments. "The college has always built inroads to community learning and has often been the conduit for establishing partnerships that evolve into exceptional learning experiences," says Dr. Alex Johnson, president of Tri-C's Metropolitan campus. The college was enthusiastic and recruited Miriam Williams to direct the program.

"I agreed, provided that we could run an academic program at Rainbow Terrace. I did not want to run an afterschool babysitting center," she says. "I also knew that the college would want to be able to measure the students' scholastic progress."

Tracking Student Progress

"Tracking and measuring participants' progress is essential to planning any program and securing funds," emphasizes Williams, an experienced program director and grants administrator. "Since Tri-C had a good history of working with the city municipal school district, school officials knew we would never misuse data that they had released to us regarding the children's academic performance. As a result, the college was able to go directly to the superintendent of the Cleveland Municipal School District to gain access to standardized test scores and marking period grades for students in the Rainbow Terrace afterschool program. We also secure parents' permission to access this information for each child."

By using school system data, Williams could compare student grades and test data prior to the December 2002 opening of the center with the same data for June 2003, after the children had been participating in the afterschool program for nearly 6 months. The results were positive: nearly half (46 percent) of the children gained a grade level in math, reading, and/or science. Williams will continue tracking and documenting the children's progress.



Tracking and measuring participants' progress is essential to planning any program and securing funds.

Miriam Williams, director of afterschool programs at Rainbow Terrace Neighborhood Networks Center, Cleveland, Ohio

Good Communication With Schools

Direct regular communication with the municipal school district and nearby elementary school is key to Rainbow Terrace's successful afterschool program. Williams works closely with nearby Anton Grdina Elementary School, which enrolls nearly 200 students who also participate in the center's afterschool program.

Williams met with the elementary school principal to obtain input while developing the program. As a result, the principal supplies Williams with the weekly curriculum for each classroom. This classroom curriculum generates the afterschool curriculum, which reinforces what each child is learning during the school day.

"At the beginning of the program, I met with each child's classroom teacher to find out what each student needed to work on," says Williams, stressing the importance of regular communication with principals and teachers. "I also meet with the children's teachers four times each year, after each marking period, to discuss their success and needs." ♦

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www.rainbowterrace.com (Rainbow Terrace Learning Center)

www.vestaievillage.com/Portfolio (Vesta Corporation)

Strong Local Partnerships Enhance Center Success

Strong partnerships with local organizations can be one of the most important elements of establishing and sustaining a Neighborhood Networks center. Partners provide expertise that complements the skills of center staff and offers an opportunity to reach deeper into the community.

Establishing and sustaining partnerships is both a challenging and rewarding part of operating a center. Identifying potential partners, establishing relationships, and developing lasting programs that are mutually beneficial helps ensure that the needs of all stakeholders are met.



Since becoming director at the Versailles Arms Apartments in New Orleans, Louisiana, in March 2003, Melissa Hughes has been busy forming local partnerships that respond to resident needs. “I had previously been with another organization and was looking for a change and new challenges. I certainly found that,” relates Hughes. The center serves the residents of the 400-unit Versailles Arms Apartments, which is home to more than 900 children, most of whom reside in households headed by single mothers with an average income of \$6,300 per year. “We also reach out to the surrounding community of New Orleans East, an economically disadvantaged and underserved community,” she adds.

The small number of staff members (Hughes and two part-time employees) means that the center relies heavily on the support of partnerships. “We couldn’t do many programs at all without their support,” states Hughes. The center staff identified programs based on a recent community needs assessment and found a strong need for adult educational programs and an enhancement to their existing youth tutoring program.

“We formed a partnership with the Orleans Parish School Board that has proved to be a tremendous asset,” relates Hughes. The school board provides paid English as a second language and general equivalency diploma teachers, as well as the books and software necessary to enhance learning. The local school board supports the effort by registering the center’s clients for classes and providing flyers and marketing materials to increase outreach. “They have provided onsite testing, a great benefit to our residents who lack transportation,” adds Hughes.

One of the strongest partnerships that the center developed is with the Individual Development Account (IDA) Collaborative of Louisiana. The collaborative provides matched savings accounts to clients to assist them in acquiring assets. “Often the clients use the accounts to save for their first home, obtain higher education, and create microenterprise ventures,” states Hughes. Through this partnership the center has guided more than 30 low-income families toward breaking the cycle of poverty and has moved them closer to achieving self-sufficiency. “Our IDA program has seen two low-income families purchase homes, and five others have completed the program to pay for higher education. One client has started his own business in the community with funds from the IDA program,” she adds.

The collaborative consists of approximately 30 organizations that support each other through trainings for program staff and clients.

We couldn't do many programs at all without [partnership] support. . . . All of our programs depend on partnerships.

Melissa Hughes, director of Versailles Neighborhood Networks Learning Center, New Orleans, Louisiana

An additional partnership with the Internal Revenue Service provides e-filing for the center's clients and supplements the IDA program by providing an avenue to encourage tax filers to enroll in and deposit their refunds in an IDA.

"Our partnerships increase outreach and service areas," says Hughes. Without the partnerships of organizations statewide, including the state IDA partnership operating from Tulane University, the program could not get the numbers it needs to continue the funding. There are several components to the IDA program, including case management, credit counseling, financial training, homebuyer training, and entrepreneurial training. "No one organization has the time and resources to provide all components of the program so we pool our resources to provide each component to each client," relates Hughes.

Close personal contact with partners helps ensure that relationships remain strong. "We work closely with our partners and make contact with many of them on a weekly basis," Hughes says. Some partners do not require regular contact but Hughes still keeps them informed of activities and progress by calling or sending a note to keep the relationship strong.

"All of our programs depend on partnerships," states Hughes. "Universities have provided us with interns, our mayor's office has provided us with free television and radio commercials recruiting volunteers, one of our senators has granted us funding for a job-training program, and our public library has supported youth reading programs."

Organizations without the financial means to hire additional staff and purchase materials find that mutually beneficial partnerships help to ensure a broad range of programs and activities for optimal center performance.

"Form as many partnerships as possible that enhance current programs or support new programs and be persistent and patient as relationships are built," states Hughes. "Maintaining personal contact with potential partners and forming relationships that over time foster long-term collaborations are beneficial to all organizations. Attend as many community meetings as your time will allow. Develop a collaborative or coalition of organizations in your community and schedule monthly meetings for networking. Not only will it help organizations increase outreach, it also will provide support from other professionals with similar missions." ♦

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Neighborhood Networks Week Offers Unique Opportunities for Centers

Neighborhood Networks Week is an annual weeklong celebration recognizing the achievements of Neighborhood Networks centers in the United States, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

In 2004 Neighborhood Networks centers were encouraged to participate by highlighting their role in “Connecting Families With the Future” in a variety of local and national Neighborhood Networks Week events from June 20–26. Centers demonstrated how they create employment and job-training opportunities, advance literacy, improve computer access, and promote the self-sufficiency of families in HUD insured and assisted housing communities.

HUD held several national events in which centers participated. In the past, national Neighborhood Networks Week events have included clinics with Major League Soccer stars, announcements featuring national and local partners, health fairs, and live Webcasts featuring NASA, Kidz Online, and Monster.com.

Each year, Neighborhood Networks Week presents an opportunity for centers to recognize the dedication of their staff, volunteers, community leaders, partners, and local businesses. Holding a Neighborhood Networks Week event can provide substantial benefits for a center and its community that may help meet some of the challenges faced by centers today. By participating in local and national Neighborhood Networks Week events, the center may:

- Increase the number of residents coming to the center and give current center users an opportunity to take part in special local and national events;
- Help develop a sense of ownership among residents who use the center;

Neighborhood Networks Week presents an opportunity for center to recognize the dedication of their staff, volunteers, community leaders, partners, and local businesses.

- Honor parents, children and youth, center staff, mentors, and partners for their support in strengthening families and building promising futures;
- Gain more funding by showcasing the center and its accomplishments;
- Attract more volunteers by increasing center visibility;
- Expand ideas and techniques for building partnerships; and
- Enhance collaboration between the property owner or manager and center staff.

As part of Neighborhood Networks Week, resident participants and center staff can plan and implement local events and activities. Potential local events could include:

- A local job fair at the center. Invite businesses and business owners to come to the center and showcase available jobs;
- A family fun day that allows parents to come with their children and socialize with other residents;
- A health fair. Contact local healthcare professionals who could help provide health screenings at the center;
- A volunteer appreciation day to recognize volunteers for all of their hard work; and
- An open house for existing and potential partners.

See the Neighborhood Networks Web site (www.NeighborhoodNetworks.org) for a list of Neighborhood Networks Week scheduled events. 

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